

What's in a Micro-Message?

You've done it. And it's been done unto you. You shake a person's hand, but barely make eye contact. You sit in on a colleague's presentation and repeatedly glance down at your watch. You "listen" while pecking away at an instant message. It turns out that these seemingly unrelated acts of disrespect have a name:

microinequities. And their impact goes far deeper than what meets the eye. Coined by MIT researcher Mary Rowe, PhD, the term has been defined as:

- subtle slights and snubs that devalue an employee
- instances of minute, subtle interactions which are perceived as imbalances of human actions, communicating who is in the inner circle and who is not
- all of the indirect offenses that can demoralize an employee

Microinequities—the seemingly harmless messages of devaluation—are a subset of the estimated 2,000 to 4,000 micro-messages that individuals send each day. Researchers cite that in the space of a one minute conversation, each individual will send between 40 and 50 micro-messages to one another. These small bits of meaning occupy a continuum with positive micro-affirmations on one end, and negative microinequities on the other. In the case of the latter, researchers contend that these negative micro-messages are rooted in powerful biases that are often subconscious.

Microinequities Equal Major Impact

However you slice it, these tragic, mini messages have a cumulative effect on morale and productivity. How could they not? They send a fundamental message about how a person is appreciated, valued, thought of and regarded. Studies show that because microinequities negatively impact feelings of inclusion and self esteem, their impact is profound. Employees who feel devalued or excluded **withdraw, retreat, take cover, lie low. In other words, they disengage and their contribution is diminished.**

Microinequities: Slights and Snubs Under the Microscope

The message is clear: you are the message. As acclaimed therapist Virginia Satir sagely noted: "When you speak, all of you speaks." Your micro-messages reveal your core feelings, and they are evident in gestures as small as a nod of the head, an insincere smile, a sideways glance, and the tone and inflection in your voice. Do you know what your micro-messages are saying? To what extent are you conscious of your own biases which may be communicated in the form of microinequities? Take a moment to consider this sampling of slights and snubs and note how many you may have communicated:

- Weak handshake with little or no eye contact
- Listening with my arms closed across my chest
- Losing eye contact while someone speaks to me
- Praising an idea presented by one; ignoring the same idea presented by another
- Pecking away at my cell phone/other device while someone is talking to me
- Looking at my watch while someone is talking to me
- Typing away at my keyboard while someone is talking to me
- Hovering over someone in a controlling or menacing way
- Replying to someone with sarcasm

If a supervisor, for example is a habitual user of microinequities such as these, their employees may be feeling varying degrees of exclusion, withdrawal, and damaged self esteem. And that's hardly a formula for tapping potential and maximizing contribution!

Tap into the Power of Micro-Affirmations

You can transform your repertoire of micro-messages by paying attention to the details of your interaction, the "how you do what you do." Begin by focusing on these six expressions of micro-MAGIC:

1. **Greet every person with sincerity: ensure that your tone is warm and upbeat. Make eye contact, smile and use their names**
2. **Connect person-to-person: bring a personal element to your interactions and acknowledge each team member beyond the role or position they occupy**
3. **Be present to the other person: focus your complete attention on them when they are speaking. Let your body language and facial expression demonstrate that you are listening**
4. **Respond to what's really being said by paraphrasing and empathizing**
5. **Draw them in by drawing them out: be an engaged and curious listener by asking questions and inviting input at every opportunity**
6. **Appreciate and praise strengths and contributions; be specific and sincere**

Macro Impact

We've all heard it said that "the devil is in the details." And while that's true of microinequities, we can also say that there's MAGIC in a sincere micro-moment. That's because when your micro-message repertoire is filled with messages that are positive, affirming and appreciative, you do two things:

- build trust and strengthen relationships, and
- provide a compelling model of appreciation and respect for others to follow

And that means team members who want to be there, and they want to contribute. Leaders who master "the how in the what," the MAGIC in the micro-moment, are rewarded with engaged teams and better performance.

(From "Are Microinequities Damaging your Workplace? Transform them with Micro-MAGIC" by Tom Larkin and Jean Marie Johnson)

SOURCES:

Eric Tate in an article by Debra Cassens Weiss, 2008 ("Microinequities' have Big Workplace Impact.") *Microinequities in the Workplace*, 2007, Fiofiori, Schlange, Ali; *Workplace Microinequities*, Lisa Armstrong; *Just What are Microinequities*, E-Mainstream, 2006